Rethinking consumer culture theory from the postmodern to the communist horizon

Bernard Cova, Pauline Maclaran and Alan Bradshaw
Marketing Theory published online 7 March 2013
DOI: 10.1177/1470593113477890

Article

Marketing Theory
1–13

DOI: 10.1177/1470593113477890
mtq.sagepub.com

Rethinking consumer culture theory from the postmodern to the communist horizon

Bernard Cova
Euromed Management, Marseille, France

Pauline Maclaran and Alan Bradshaw
Royal Holloway, University of London, Surrey, UK

Abstract

We explore the slow disappearance of the postmodern critique that challenged mainstream marketing and emphasised the importance of locating phenomena in their wider social, political and historic contexts to expose embedded power relationships and ideologies. After an initial overview of how postmodernism impacted on theorising in consumer research, we highlight how it reached saturation point, with many of its ideas accepted into mainstream marketing. Following this claimed demise of the postmodern critique, we review the proliferation of post-postmodern proposals and speculate from where the next theoretical direction will originate. As part of this analysis, we focus on a group of theorists who are giving communism a renaissance and consider how these ideas can help us critique and reimagine consumer culture theory.

Keywords

Communism, consumer culture theory, postmodernism, post-postmodernism, saturation

> I have some good news—kick back, relax, enjoy the rest of the summer, stop worrying about where your life is and isn't heading. What news? Well, on 24th September 2011, we can officially and definitively declare that **postmodernism is dead. Finished. History.** A difficult period in human thought over and done with. How do I know this? Because that is the date when the Victoria and Albert Museum opens what it calls 'the first comprehensive retrospective' in the world: Postmodernism—Style and Subversion 1970–1990
>
> Edward Docx (20th July 2011, *Prospect*, issue 185).

Corresponding author:
Bernard Cova, Euromed Management, Domaine de Luminy BP 921, Marseille 13 288, France.
Email: bernard.cova@euromed-marseille.com

> 'The fateful question for our time is **what comes after post-modernism**, what comes after the after'? (Block, 2009).

The above comments echo the response made by a reviewer to a recent article submitted to a marketing journal by one of the present authors: '*It's nearly twenty years since postmodernism appeared on the marketing scene and it's pretty much disappeared from view. No one uses the term anymore, since it's been absorbed into and subsumed by CCT'*. Indeed, Arnould and Thompson (2005: 868) introduced consumer culture theory (CCT) in response to the limits of postmodernism as a term for interpretive consumer research, along with other terms such as humanistic, naturalistic, post-positivist and relativist. They argued that these terms all did more to obscure, rather than clarify, the theoretical linkages. They positioned CCT as a way to contribute to consumer research by illuminating the cultural dimensions of consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

So, why should we care about the so-called end of postmodernism from a CCT perspective? As Kazys Varnelis bluntly puts it on his blog, '*postmodernism just faded away. Apart from a few academics, nobody seemed to care*' (http://varnelis.net/). The present authors care, however, because postmodernism inspired us to challenge mainstream marketing theories and rethink consumer research in significant ways that exposed embedded ideologies and power relations in taken-for-granted concepts and techniques. In exploring the end of the postmodern critique, we wonder: where can we now look to set research within its wider sociohistoric context? After all, the postmodern critique confronted previous notions that theory represents reality and showed how theory was mediated socially, historically and linguistically. Yet now, as Firat commented in a recent interview, '*the postmodern has become untouchable*' (Bradshaw and Dholakia, 2011: 6). If the demise of postmodernity is understood as reflecting a shift in zeitgeist that renders postmodernism anachronistic, then where can we locate centres and convergences in contemporary critical theory? We submit that a new centre is forming around an idea so previously undermined that its return is unexpected and even shocking, namely communism! This article first argues that there has been a demise in postmodern theory, then notes the renaissance of communism in theory, considers some of its main arguments, and discusses their implications for CCT.

The postmodern perspective and its impact on consumer research

As Brown (1995) argues, one of the many difficulties in talking about postmodernity attends its lack of coherence, as it is fragmented and many of its main proponents never used the term postmodern to locate their work. Therefore the answer to the question 'what is postmodern'? for Brown (1995) is '*postmodern isn't*'. This means that postmodernism always exists in a state of uncentred excess and any discussion that traces its arrival runs the risk of misrepresentation. For example to claim, as we do, that postmodernism exposes embedded power relationships and ideologies is to ignore how modernist theory also sets about this task. It also fails to recognise the large body of critical work that pre-empted postmodernism (see Tadajewski, 2010, for an overview of the history of marketing's critical analysis). In this regard, postmodern is the name for a renaissance moment in our subject's history as it opened up to better engage with insights from numerous directions. These included post-structuralism, critical theory, and interventions and critiques from such subject areas as feminism, culture studies and sociology. Insights from these subject areas began to be more directly engaged with, and incorporated into, the centre of analysis. Postmodernism, then, for interpretive consumer research became an exciting moment in which the filters that determined which theories were relevant became overwhelmed by the flow of radical theories that

displaced previous assumptions, temporarily invigorating everything and licensing creative expositions that expressed alternatives. The name that we give to this moment of the radical invigoration, the adrenalin of the new, and the sense of displacement coupled with disorientation, as old certainties gave way, is postmodernism. It is precisely this sense of creative destabilisation that we experience now as lost, a loss that leads us to scan the horizon for new equivalent stimulation.

This event that we call postmodernism (Rosenau, 1992) incited new perspectives and debates across many disciplines in the social sciences, humanities and even physical sciences (Firat and Dholakia, 2006). Entering consumer and marketing research in the early 1990s, it stimulated questions about all marketing theories (Brown, 1999) and consumer research (Sherry, 1991) leaving a lasting impact on our field:

> Above and beyond empirical manifestations of the postmodern impulse, the field of marketing and consumer research has been revolutionised by postmodern methodologies, epistemologies, axiologies, ontologies, eschatologies (any ologies you can think of, really) (Brown, 2006: 226).

Consumer and marketing research was deconstructed and subsequently rebuilt around denunciations of truth, the effects of which could be clearly seen in the interpretive approach, whose ontology revolves around the idea that the reality is '*socially constructed, multiple, holistic, contextual*' (Tadajewski, 2006: 438), and whose epistemology maintains that '*knowledge is not approached from the standpoint of an external, objective position, but from the lived experience of the research co-participant*' (Tadajewski, 2006: 430).

Cultural perspectives towards consumption, like most of the precepts of the interpretive approach to consumption research (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988) and marketing research (Brownlie et al., 1999), have their roots in this flow of postmodernism, as the main influence that structured their ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological cores. Led by such paradigm-shifting studies as the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey* (Belk, 1987), interpretive researchers denounced the search for truth (and for a particular representation of reality), calling such efforts illusory and chimeric (Anderson, 1986). They also highlighted the harmful legacy of modernism in reinforcing existing power structures and developing new means for epic annihilation (Bristor and Fischer, 1993; Fischer and Bristor, 1994; Hirschman, 1993; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994).

Of course it is important to note that as a fragmented body of research, postmodernism was not a unified *chapelle* and throughout its history, core distinctions exist. For example, one highly influential European theorist was Maffesoli, whose ideas of neo-tribalism emphasised the social links and communities made possible through consumption (Cova, 1997). By contrast, North American theorising often highlighted ideas of increasingly individualised consumerist values understood as freed from traditional status markers such as class (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat and Dholakia, 1998). Both perspectives, however, delineated how a new kind of paradoxical consumer emerged from sociocultural fermentations that emphasised ideas of a productive consumer whose consumption needed to be understood as much more creative and communicative. This idea of a productive consumer who creates value during consumption was especially far-reaching and innovative for consumer research and marketing. Sometimes value creation could be theorised as existing in opposition to marketers, that is, whenever meanings were appropriated and changed by consumers from those intended (see for example, Maclaran and Brown, 2005). Throughout this period, the methods of consumer research became all but unlimited as the subject embraced new

formulae for understanding processes of meaning creation and mutation: hermeneutics, phenomenology, semiotics, semiology and ethnography to name but a few.

Thus, from the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s, postmodernism played a major transformative role by revealing sociocultural processes at work in consumption activities. In tandem, the subject was forced to engage more extensively with critical questions around issues of gender, race, ethnicity and class. In this context, this moment of postmodernism might be regarded as synonymous with the '*cultural turn*' in the social sciences, a cultural turn espoused by the interpretivist community of the time and later subsumed into the CCT project (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

Ideas take many years to migrate from the edge to the centre of academic disciplines. Through CCT, cultural perspectives and their application to wider marketing management have gained mainstream recognition (Penaloza et al., 2012). Now, for example, consumer co-creation of value in goods and services and the concomitant idea of mass customisation are widely accepted in mainstream marketing circles and stem directly from the postmodern collapsing of production/consumption binaries and the foregrounding of the consumer as a meaning-making subject. Similarly, hermeneutic and semiotic approaches are widely used in mainstream-marketing research. It seems, therefore, more than coincidence that, soon after setting up CCT (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), postmodernism vanished into obscurity, taking with it the more critical edge to cultural perspectives. This despite two noteworthy articles (Brown, 2006; Firat and Dholakia, 2006) that detailed how the postmodern had 'problematised' marketing practice, marketing theory, marketing organisations and marketing relationships and how it had fostered major changes in consumer research. In many ways, these two articles can be read as obituaries for postmodernism in consumer research. It seems that, with the birth of CCT – a project that came with an explicit aim of establishing stronger branding and institutional recognition of a marginal community of interpretivist scholars within the harsh Anglo-American academic environment – we see a slow disappearance of radical interventions and gestures and, instead, increased emphasis on incremental contributions concerning the cultural turn and its relevance for mainstream scholarship. It is tempting to feel nostalgic for the headiness and sheer open-mindedness of the more radical postmodern contributions, perhaps best encapsulated in the now lapsed Heretical Consumer Research conference – in its lapse, we see the return of orthodoxy.

Saturation of postmodern ideas in consumer research

The movement of postmodernism into mainstream marketing marked their saturation in consumer research. As Sorokin (1937) explains, a cultural process reaches its '*point of saturation*' and reverses its movement. The source of this cultural variation, in Sorokin's view, is primarily the '*principle of immanent change*' rather than externally caused because incessant change is an inherent consequence of any cultural system. Indeed, while celebrating postmodern contributions to consumer and marketing research, some researchers, amongst the interpretive community, have pinpointed its limitations (from Holt, 2002; to Maclaran, 2009 and Tadajewski, 2010, including Goulding, 2003; O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002 and others). For example, Catterall et al. (2005) argued that collective critique of wider social, economic and political structures had been stifled because rebellion takes place on an individual basis in the marketplace or within market-based subcultures. As Firat highlights (Bradshaw and Dholakia, 2011), the market is a modern rather than postmodern phenomenon, with an amazing capacity to incorporate resistance or opposition into commercially successful products and services.

Perhaps, the most defining gesture of postmodernism was Fukuyama's (1992) bold contention that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, history had achieved itself as major ideological clashes arrived at their end point with liberal capitalo-parliamentarian political economy prevailing. This idea of death of alternative is presented in Boltanski and Chiapello's (2007) '*new spirit of capitalism*', which outlines capitalism's remarkable recuperation of critique. Similarly, Braidotti (2005) highlights how the neo-liberal ideology that dominates western politics, celebrates rather than suppresses difference, thereby creating new hierarchies of exclusion through the reassertion of markers of cultural belonging at the national, regional or local levels that mark the return of different forms of determinism.

The last 5 years have seen few articles published in marketing journals using the term postmodern in their title (Kniazeva and Venkatesh, 2007; Kniazeva and Belk, 2007; Simmons, 2008; Tiwsakul and Hackley, 2012). Now, it is more academically relevant to include 'performative' or 'practice' in the title or to use one of the recent academic three letter acronyms such as CCT or Service Dominant Logic (SDL) (Cova et al., 2009). Strangely, marketing articles that still openly claim a postmodern stance are coming from emergent countries such as Croatia (Kesic and Kursan, 2008) or Turkey (Yüksel and Mirza, 2010). Firat (Bradshaw and Dholakia, 2011) speculates that the west has not yet transcended modernity (the market being its prime institution), but that the transition to postmodernity is currently occurring in countries like India and Turkey, where multiple orders and ways of thinking co-exist and people move between orders without identity conflict. Yet, despite Firat's conviction that the west is still modern and that postmodernism has yet to come, the general consensus appears to be that the postmodern moment is over. As Firat put it: '*Not a lot of people are thinking postmodern anymore . . . There are people saying it is post-postmodern and postmodernism has become a dirty word*' (Firat in Bradshaw and Dholakia, 2011: 6).

Post-postmodernism?

So if postmodernism is over, how might we refer to the present moment? A handful of terms have been suggested to label the trends that allegedly come after postmodernism (Boje, 2011). For example, Fjellestad and Engberg (2012) offer the following list that reflects the recent proliferation of new terms: 'post-millennialism' (Eric Gans), 'performatism' (Raoul Eshelman), 'digimodernism' (Alan Kirby), 'Remodernism' (Katherine Evans), 'Retro-Modernism' (Jim Collins), 'Supermodernism' (Paul Crowther), 'Hypermodernism' (Gilles Lipovetsky), 'Metamodernism' (Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker), 'Altermodern' (Nicolas Bourriaud), 'Automodernity' (Robert Samuels), 'Critical Modernism' (Charles Jencks) or 'cosmodernism' (Christian Moraru). None of these terms, however, is as popular as that of 'post-postmodernism', which appears to function as a useful, albeit problematic, shorthand for the current turning away from postmodernism and a general recognition that there is '*a new ''sense'', a new meaning and direction*' arising from the ashes of postmodernism (Vermeulen and Van der Akker, 2010: 4).

Although all these terms may share an interest in reacting to postmodernism, they refer to different issues and adopt different stances towards what comes afterwards. However, common characteristics differentiate post-postmodern positions from postmodernism; namely enthusiasm, engagement and sincerity. For example, it is claimed that a new type of enthusiasm is evident that counters postmodern apathy and self-detached tendencies towards nihilism (Vermeulen and Van der Akker, 2010), an enthusiasm that, through engagement, brings renewed hope in reconstruction rather than deconstruction:

> This change of prefixes from 'de-' to 're-' marks a shift from the stance of negativity and opposition, of tearing matters apart to that of stitching things back together, of going back to previously held positions and convictions to revive and reconfigure them (Fjellestad and Engberg, 2012).

In tandem, post-postmodern perspectives represent a new earnestness that turns away from postmodern irony and pastiche to a more realist worldview that arises out of events like 9/11 and the financial crisis.

If we consider post-postmodernism as a post-deconstructive approach in which deconstruction is no longer an excuse for inaction or withdrawal, then the very idea of creating CCT can be considered as a post-postmodern act, a kind of '*manifesto*' (Bode and Ostergaard, 2012). The gathering of fragmented pieces resulting from the deconstruction of previously dominant theories into a coherent whole could be considered as an act of reconfiguration, recombination, reorganisation and so on. Thus, CCT emerges as an act of reconstruction (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) to convince those in power to recognise CCT as a legitimate stream (Bode and Ostergaard, 2012). Similarly, the emergent Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) shows signs of enthusiasm, sincerity and engagement, if not radical political economic critique. Its mission is to focus rigorous and applied research on quality of life for better assisting consumers, caregivers, policy administrators and executives. It is a devoted engagement with consumers and society, and addresses well-being, 'in a manner that speaks of shared values, empathy, immediacy, and usefulness' (Mick et al., 2011: 11):

> TCR endorses a new role and image for consumer researchers as advocates for, and close partners with, consumers . . . TCR investigators are committed to a role of public servant (Mick et al., 2011: 8).

In searching through the aforementioned post-postmodern consumer research positions, it is hard to see a strong critical discourse emerging to replace postmodern critique and its challenge to mainstream theorising. Indeed, this seemingly endless list of terms, all vying for a position that tries to encapsulate the zeitgeist of a previous era, may simply be the signs that postmodernism is not dead after all. As Maffesoli (2010) rightly suggests, this proliferation may reflect a hyper-individualised and increasingly fragmented community in its overall quest to speed up the branding of new concepts and make others obsolete (Cova et al., 2009).

In his recent book on post-postmodernism, first to deal explicitly with this notion, Nealon (2012: 113) points to a group of European theorists, who have avoided the scholarly bandwagon of new terms, but who claim that '*postmodernism is already half obsolete*' (Zizek, 2010: 246) and salute the reawakening of history (Badiou, 2012). All sharing a communist background, they propose a post-deconstructive approach to theory and build an explicit critique of the whole postmodernist antitotalisation mode of thinking. All in all, these authors ask '*what happens to the critical discourse 'deconstruction' when capitalism in practice assumes the role of 'deconstruction' par excellence'?* (Nealon, 2012: 122). With such thoughts in mind, we now turn attention to the renaissance of communist theory that these scholars enact and consider the implications for CCT.

Post-postmodernism and the left

Leftist theory – that is the general body of theory, which treats capitalism itself as the object of critical analysis – having been diagnosed previously as melancholic (Brown, 1999) is today invigorated by the unexpected reappearance of communism as a conceptual intervention and rallying point. While the revival was arguably begun by Hardt and Negri's *Empire* in 2000 and by general debates regarding revolution associated with scholars like Holloway and Bensaid, the key moment of revival seems to

have been Badiou's polemic against the *disgusting deed* that saw the French electorate vote Nicholas Sarkozy as President. Badiou's *Meaning of Sarkozy,* saturated with indignation, concludes with a call for communism and the rhetoric of Sartre: *every anti-communist is a swine* (Badiou, 2008: 99). As Thomas (2012) reflects, Badiou's bold statement arose from a crisis of leftist politics that stemmed from blockages – for instance the ineffective opposition to the Iraq War whilst neo-liberalism emerged as the dominate paradigm. From such a zero point, Thomas argues it was possible to create a new theoretical political scape and hence the zeitgeist nature of Badiou's intervention.

With momentum on his side, Alain Badiou, along with Slavoj Zizek and Costas Douzinas, convened a conference in London in which contributors confirmed their solidarity with communism. The outcome was a gathering of many of the most prominent theorists of the age, including Jacques Ranciere, Etienne Balibar, Jean-Luc Nancy, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, which took place before a giant audience in 2008 (see Douzinas and Zizek's, 2010 edited volume of submissions to the conference). Meanwhile, 2012 was the year of '*dreaming dangerously*' (Zizek, 2012), and across the globe we saw various Occupy movements, the Arab Spring, massive occupations in Athens and Madrid and riots in London. The aggregate effect of riots and uprisings suggests a convergence and renewal of the radical at both theoretical and populist levels that seem to counter any Fukuyama idea that history is over.

Various manifestations of communist theories are purported by a range of authors and in this section we seek to synopsise key contributions (albeit all-too-briefly) and identify seminal authors. To begin, a classical articulation of communism – close in spirit to Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* – is presented by Negri (2010), who states that: communists assume that history is always the history of class struggle, are against the State (with the State understood to be the force that organises the relations that constitute capital and disciplines the conflicts between capitalists and the proletarian labour force) and that being communist means building a new world, where the exploitation of capital and subjection to the State are eliminated.

By contrast, for Badiou, the '*communist hypothesis*' is a neo-Platonic eternal and universal idea, rather than a specific programme. For Badiou, communism is best understood as a set of intellectual patterns actualised in particular political sequences. These sequences are initiated by *historic events* that rupture the status quo and call into being, or *subjectivate*, new ontological conditions (Badiou, 2001). Communism therefore connects politics to something other than itself. As Badiou puts it:

> The Communist Idea exists only at the border between the individual and the political procedure, as that element of subjectivation that is based on a historical projection of politics. The Communist Idea is what constitutes the becoming-political Subject of the individual as also and at the same time his or her projection into History. (2010: p. 4)

Similarly, Dean (2012) declines to specify a programme but rather conceives communism as a horizon – that is a fundamental division that we experience as real yet impossible to reach. Communism, then, is a necessary dimension and a vocabulary that allows us to express desires for universal, egalitarian and revolutionary ideals. Hence, we can regard communist desire as a collective desire for collective desire. This new way of being forges a common desire out of individuated ones, replacing individual weakness with collective strength. Dean argues that such a sublime moment was presented in the rhetorical genius of Occupy Wall Street's declaration that *We are the 99%*. According to Dean, this rhetorical gesture converts a statistic into a crime, a crime that is then subjectivised in a manner that not just names an appropriation, but also voices a collective desire for equality and justice. For Dean, such moments ought to be understood as ruptures that allow the left to

manifest itself as a collective political presence against the presupposition that '*we will go along with the status quo and do nothing as we are being dispossessed*' (Dean, 2012: 212).

A major influence on the work of Dean as well as wider discussions of communism is provided by Slavoj Zizek. For Zizek (2010), communism is an inevitability, as global capitalism arrives at its apocalyptic zero point brought about by the '*four riders of the apocalypse*'; ecological crisis, the consequences of biogenetic innovations, imbalances that arise from the internal contradiction of capital accumulation and finally the growth of social divisions and exclusions. In order to imagine communism, Zizek presents a reading of Kafka and conceives a total form of immersion into a social body, where liberal individualist prejudices and critical distances dissolve. However, this dissolution of critical individuality does not lead to uniformity. Rather, it allows for authentic individuality because what is suspended is not the rationality of the self but individual survivalist instincts. What prevails is a universal space for rational thought.

Following 2011, the '*year of dreaming dangerously*' and watching the dissolution of popular mobilisations in Syntagma Square, Zuccoti Park, Tahrir Square and elsewhere, Zizek rejects a nostalgic-narcissist remembrance of sublime moments of enthusiasm or cynical-realist explanations of failure. Instead, he argues that we should take these events as limited and distorted fragments of a utopian future dreamt in the present as its hidden potential. This entails an art of recognising elements that are in our space but whose time belongs to the emancipated future of the Communist Idea. Crucially, Zizek argues that this future is not discernible from any neutral or objective standpoint, but only from the engaged position – much like how miracles are only visible to believers. In this regard, he equates the Badiouian notion of an event with a miracle – a sudden intrusion of the impossible into ordinary reality that momentarily suspends its causal nexus and only exists for those who take the engaged subject position. Therefore, Tahrir Square should be read, Zizek argues, as a sign from a communist future, not an objective and inevitable future but a future only realisable through a subjective engagement.

CCT has always been communist!

Whilst CCT has an impressive record of exploring how ideology structures consumer culture, CCT is less impressive at being reflexive in terms of its own production of ideology. Bouchet (2011: 440) comments: '*The way that anyone, including academic researchers, understand and interpret desire reflects, at least in part, the desires of that person – for example, whether that relates to viewing desires as a shallow reflection of capitalist-driven consumer cultures or as the freedom of individuals to express through their consumption*'. Accordingly, it is interesting to conceive much of the field of CCT as embodying the desire of its researchers to see the world as a consumer culture mediated by mythology. At an axiomatic level, we remember that there is no pre-given actuality to being a consumer; that is to say that the word 'consumer' does not refer to a state of being but rather is a bestowed frame. And as Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) attest, mythology is precisely that which, dialectically understood, trips up the enlightenment project and prevents a rationality of the body politic. Indeed, throughout the body of work that deals with mythology, myths are always presented as incapable of actual political critique that might fundamentally alter capitalist structures. Instead, they are presented as moments of reappropriation and redirection back to the logic of commodification; gestures of non-politics. Unlike communist theory, which tends to emphasise events that rupture the status quo, CCT chooses to only see moments of capture and reproduction.

As Bouchet (2011) reminds us, the point is not that mythology forecloses the political but rather that CCT desires to see consumer culture as mediated by mythology so as to be self-reproductive.

In other words, following Zizek's argument, CCT maintains its own active subject position, a subject position that only sees the possibility of capitalist reproduction. It is thus incapable of detecting *signs from a communist future*. In contrast, communism confronts the politicality of CCT's active subject position and asks why not take a different subject position? Why not defect?

As Dean (2012) argues, neo-liberalism's rhetorical synonymy of consumer style with social equality, or the conflation of freedom of consumer choice with democracy itself, finds historical roots as a form of anticommunist propaganda. Within marketing scholarship, we see renewed interest in how ideas of marketing and consumerism are saturated by Cold War dynamics. For example, Schwarzkopf's (2011) historical analysis demonstrates how the idea of consumer agency and freedom to choose was mobilised by power interests at opportune moments during the Cold War. Similarly, Tadajewski (2010) demonstrates how the production and reception of marketing knowledge were often determined and driven by US military and corporate interests. Such important scholarship poses the question of how many Cold War rhetorical claims remain axiomatically encoded within marketing and CCT or, put differently: we ask to what extent is there truth in the claim that CCT is the continuation of the Cold War through other means? Again the location of the active subjective point is crucial.

The consequence of Dean's argument is that communism remains axiomatically internalised within CCT and serves as its ideological counterpoint. However, unlike influential Foucault-inspired analyses into how discourses ultimately constitute each other, the communist hypothesis breaks this cycle, emphasises rupture and creates its own conditions of truth, ethics and subject. As Zizek puts it, communism presents us with a theory that turns on the possibility of miracles. If this seems to be madly utopian, then Zizek (2010) reminds us that the true mad utopianism of today is to imagine that things continue as they are, and that capitalism's zero sum games of ecological degradation and widening class gaps can continue indefinitely.

A shift towards embracing communism means considering the political orientation and active subject position of CCT. Such a turn entails modes of analyses that do not merely seek to interpret consumer culture, but that instead seek out and cultivate moments of resistance and rupture. This turn takes as its starting assumption the idea that existing circumstances are unacceptable and proceeds on the basis of detecting will towards collective subjectivation and transformations of the political economic landscape.

The final gesture of arguing for the inextractability of communism from CCT is to point towards the subject's embedment in the theory of the left. For example, the recent CCT Canon of Classics workshop mostly consisted of readings of leftists scholars – Marx, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, Bauman, Habermas and so on. For the most part, CCT obviously embeds itself in a trajectory of theory that exists in and for the left. However, CCT has allowed itself to fall into the melancholic state, as Dean (2012: 15) might put it, CCT, like the left, '*failed to defend an egalitarian world of common production by and for the collective. Instead it has accommodated capital, succumbed to its lures of individualism, consumerism, competition and privilege and proceeded as if there really were no alternative to states that rule in the interests of markets*'. We must acknowledge that the conditions that produced such melancholy have been ruptured by events and the 'context of context' has transformed around us. As Berardi (2012) insists, we are now in a situation in which the will of power and the research of the good, once merged into a singular ideological framework, diverge and the dead end of research that fails to see possibilities of transformation increasingly appears unacceptably cynical:

> Here the fork of irony and cynicism opens. Irony suspends the semantic value of the signifier and chooses freely among a thousand possible interpretations. The ironic interpretation implies and

> presupposes a common ground of understanding among the interlocutors, a sympathy among those who are involved in the ironic act, and a common autonomy from the dictatorship of the signified. Cynicism starts from the same suspension, but is a slavish modulation of irony: irony at the service of power. While irony does not postulate the existence of any reality, cynicism postulates the inescapable reality of power, particularly the power of the economy. Irony is an opening of a game of infinite possibilities; cynicism is a dissociation of ethics and possibility. The cynical mood starts from the idea that ethical action has no possibility of succeeding. The ironist sleeps happily because nothing can awake her from her dreams. The cynicist sleeps a light sleep, he dreams nightmares, and he gets up as soon as power calls him (Berardi, 2012: 168–69).

We submit that the trajectory of leftist theory rejects the dissociation of ethics and possibility and instead brings us to the current conceptualisations of communism. The convergence of major theorists like Zizek, Badiou, Berardi, Hart, Nancy, Ranciere, Balibar and so many others into these questions of communism is obviously a signal moment that gestures towards where theory's contemporary fault lines are to be found. To ignore this phenomenon would be to commit the subject to an anachronistic theory and, arguably, would mark an invalid relationship with the theoretical tradition upon which the subject draws.

Contemporary critical theory is in a current – post-postmodern – state of invigoration thanks to a Badiou-inspired radicalisation that pulls theory out of its melancholia back to radical interventions with clear commitments to universal ideals of social justice and egalitarianism. The potential consequences of this paradigm shift for CCT are tremendous: should this theory be engaged with – as we argue is imperative – then the possibility of shifting the active subject position of the consumer culture theorist becomes possible and a series of axiomatic ideologies – sublimated or otherwise – come into focus and allow for radical rethinking. In the very least, faith in the eternality of capitalism is disrupted and we can dare to imagine an alternative order, and see its germinations in the everyday and in the occasional rupture of the extraordinary and once again allow our research to be guided by an association of ethics and possibility.

Conclusion

Many cultural commentators have pronounced postmodernism to be in its death throes, now little more than an ongoing market-driven quest to celebrate difference and establish new market segments. We have traced postmodernism from its appearance to its disappearance with the establishment of CCT, and argued that, in its quest for mainstream legitimacy, CCT subsumed postmodernism into its consumer identity projects and market-based formations. Noting the current post-postmodern critique, we have then highlighted a group of more radical theorists, who we believe have much to say to consumer culture researchers, especially if we want to build a wider critique of '*context of contexts*' (see Askegaard and Trolle Linnet, 2011). These theorists have the potential to enable us to hold a mirror to ourselves and become a much more politically reflexive community of scholars, who once again critique the macrostructures in which our work is located. At stake is the possibility of radicalising our research again and to open up our research to new agenda of ethics and possibility otherwise unimaginable.

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Author biographies

Bernard Cova is a professor of Marketing at Euromed Management, Marseilles and Visiting Professor at Bocconi University Milan. His work has been published in the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, the *European Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Management*, the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, *Marketing Theory*, *Consumption, Market and Culture* and the *Journal of Business Research*. He also edited various books including *Consumer Tribes* and *Consuming Experiences*. Address: Euromed Management, Domaine de Luminy BP 921, 13 288 Marseille Cedex 9, France. [email: bernard.cova@euromed-marseille.com]

Pauline Maclaran is a professor of marketing and consumer research at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her publications have been in internationally recognised journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Psychology and Marketing*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Business Research* and *Consumption, Markets and Culture*. She has co-edited various books including The *Sage Handbook of Marketing Theory* and, most recently, *Consumption and Spirituality*. Address: Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX. [email: pauline.maclaran@rhul.ac.uk]

Alan Bradshaw teaches and learns at Royal Holloway, University of London. Address: Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX. [email: alan.bradshaw@rhul.ac.uk]